

**Supplemental
Evaluation Report
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High School Exit Examination (HSEE): Supplemental Year 1 Evaluation Report

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Executive Summary

Background

California has embarked on a new program to ensure that all students graduating from high school meet minimum standards for verbal and quantitative skills. The California Education Code, Chapter 8, Section 60850, specifies requirements for the High School Exit Examination (HSEE). Beginning with the Class of 2004, students must pass both the mathematics and English /language arts sections of this exam to receive a diploma from a public high school in California. Since January 2000, the California Department of Education (CDE) has worked with a development contractor to develop and try out test questions for use in the HSEE. The current schedule calls for testing 9th graders on a voluntary basis in March and May of 2001 with mandatory testing of all 10th graders (except those passing the exam as 9th graders) in 2002. That will be followed by several additional testing opportunities each year for students who have not yet passed the exam.

The legislation specifying the requirements for the new exam also called for an independent evaluation of the HSEE. CDE awarded a contract for this evaluation to the Human Resources Research Organization (HumRRO). Our evaluation will analyze data from tryouts of the test questions and the annual administrations of the HSEE and report on trends in pupil performance and pupil retention, graduation, dropout, and college attendance rates. The evaluation will include recommendations for improving the quality, fairness, validity, and reliability of the examination.

The first evaluation report was issued on June 30, 2000. That report covered a review of the implementation of exit examinations in other states, analyses of data from the Spring 2000 field test (tryout of questions), workshops conducted to determine how well draft questions were aligned to the targeted test content standards and to current classroom instruction, and surveys of teachers and principals to establish baseline data for determining the impact of the new requirement. The report concluded that a remarkable amount of progress had been made in developing the HSEE and that results to date were quite positive in that a large number of high quality test questions had been developed. The report cautioned, however, that a great deal remained to be done prior to implementation of the HSEE. In addition, the low proportion of correct answers in the field test, relatively low ratings of the alignment of the current curriculum to the test questions, and low estimated passing rates in the principal survey all suggested that students were currently not well-prepared for the HSEE. The overarching recommendation was that consideration should be given to delaying implementation of the new graduation requirement to allow more time to prepare the test for students and, more importantly, more time to prepare students for the test.

The present report describes supplemental analyses of the field test data, including information on the essay questions (Chapter 2). Because of the time required to score the responses to these questions, data were not available on these questions in time for inclusion in our June 30 report. This supplemental report also provides more detail on

curriculum-alignment ratings and passing rates for individual content standards (Chapter 3) and updated results from the teacher and principal surveys (Chapter 4). The report concludes with updates to our initial conclusions and new recommendations for improving the HSEE.

Key Findings and Recommendations

Our main conclusions are unchanged from those stated in the June 30 report. Further progress has been made in developing plans for remaining implementation activities. Analyses of the supplemental field test data indicate that a significant number of high-quality essay questions have been developed. Scores on the responses to these questions were relatively low, however, reinforcing concerns that students are not yet well prepared to pass this examination. Analyses of passing rates and ratings for individual content standards suggest that algebra standards and English/language arts standards involving integration and analysis are most problematic for students today, although performance and curriculum-alignment ratings were generally low for all of the standards.

Specific recommendations, discussed in detail in Chapter 5 of this report, are described briefly here. We continue to believe that a delay in implementing the HSEE should be considered to avoid negative consequences for students who are not well prepared and to reduce the possibility of flaws that might lead to termination of the program before it can achieve its goals. Consideration should be given to first holding schools accountable for teaching to state content standards before implementing consequences for students. Our first recommendation is:

Recommendation 1. The Legislature and Governor should give serious consideration to postponing full implementation of the HSEE requirement by 1 or 2 years.

The trade-off between risks with the current implementation schedule and risks to students associated with delaying implementation is a policy-judgment that has already been made by the legislature in enacting provisions for the HSEE. The Superintendent of Public Instruction and the State Board of Education have no choice but to proceed with implementation of the HSEE on the current schedule. CDE has made good progress in developing plans for remaining implementation activities. We think it would now be useful to lay out a more detailed timeline for public review so that issues can be identified and addressed as early as possible. We also believe that rapid implementation must be supported by significant funding for state and district activities. Our specific recommendations in support of meeting the current development schedule are:

Recommendation 2. CDE should develop and seek comment on a more detailed timeline for HSEE implementation activities. This timeline should show responsibility for each required task and responsibility for oversight of the performance of each task. The plan should show key points at which decisions by the Board or others are required along with separate paths for alternative decisions that may be made at each of these points.

Recommendation 3. CDE and the Board should work with districts to identify resource requirements associated with HSEE implementation. The Legislature must

be ready to continue to fund activities to support the preparation of students to meet the ambitious challenges embodied in the HSEE.

The State Board is about to adopt specifications for the content to be covered by the examination (content standards) and will subsequently be asked to approve minimum passing scores (performance standards) for mathematics and for English/language arts. We are concerned that there could be some confusion between expectations for average student performance, which is commonly the focus of school-level accountability discussions, and expectations for the minimum performance that should be required for graduation. Specific recommendations with respect to the content and performance standards are:

Recommendation 4. The Board should adopt a clear statement of its intentions in setting HSEE content and performance standards. This statement should describe the extent to which these standards are targeted to ensure minimum achievement relative to current levels or to significantly advance overall expectations for student achievement.

Recommendation 5. The Board should exhibit moderation in selecting content standards and setting performance standards for the initial implementation of HSEE. Standards should be subsequently expanded or increased based on evidence of improved instruction.

Recommendation 6. Members of the HSEE Panel and its Technical Advisory Committee should participate in developing recommendations for minimum performance standards.

We also discuss a number of technical issues in Chapter 5, based on our review of plans developed by CDE and the development contractor. Given tight time constraints, we suggest that there needs to be a process for timely independent review of technical issues to ensure the feasibility and defensibility of the approaches taken. CDE has already made plans to engage a technical consultant for this purpose. Our general recommendation, which is intended to suggest that two or three such consultants might be useful, is:

Recommendation 7. CDE should move swiftly to establish an independent Technical Issues Committee (TIC) to recommend approval or changes to the HSEE development contractor's plans for item screening, form assembly, form equating, and scoring and reporting.

We also offer specific suggestions to strengthen the equating of scores from different test forms and suggest the feasibility and desirability of providing feedback to schools participating in the field tests.

Our report concludes with an update on specific recommendations offered in the June 30 report. These include the need to clarify the relationship between different high school testing programs, the need to provide information and support to districts as they prepare for the HSEE, and the need for more planning and research on test accommodations for special needs students and English language learners.

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